

Canadian Historical Association

THE HISTORIANS AND PUBLIC POLICY: *Some Reflections Based on a Visit to Canadian Peacekeepers*

A part-time member of the history department at Wilfrid Laurier University, I am also a Faculty Associate at the Laurier Centre for Military, Strategic and Disarmament Studies (LCMSDS). The purpose of the Centre is to "foster research, teaching, and public discussion of military and strategic issues of national and international significance." Wilfrid Laurier is one of twelve universities across Canada which receive financial support from the Security and Defence Forum (SDF) of the Department of National Defence as part of its mandate to "develop a domestic competence and national interest in defence issues of current and future relevance to Canadian security." Under this mandate, the Directorate of Public Policy at National Defence organized a visit by the SDF Directors or their representatives to Israel and Egypt in March 1997 primarily to study the Middle East Peace Process. Tours of Canadian Forces Missions in the region were included in the itinerary. Given my teaching and research background in peacekeeping as a historian of Canadian foreign and defence policy, I was named as the LCMSDS participant.

As a student of the past, being offered a chance to travel to a part of the world which literally oozes 2 000 years of history from every pore was a special privilege in and of itself; in the emotionally-charged atmosphere of the Middle East, history really is everything. However, this field trip also afforded a golden opportunity not only to gain a bird's eye view of Canadian peacekeepers — and thus compare personal impressions with historical stereotypes — but to consider as well what historians can bring to issues of public policy.

Such excursions can be a boon to the historian. It all depends, of course, on the type of history one studies, but in my case at least the benefits were pronounced. Military historians often claim that a battle can truly be understood only by "walking the ground", that is, by exploring the battlefield itself. My own recent experience suggests that this axiom has wider applications. The unobstructed vistas of miles of Israeli and Syrian territory obtained standing in an abandoned Israeli outpost atop the Golan Heights drive home their strategic importance — and hence the value of the peacekeepers stationed there — more forcefully than any written description ever could. Visiting isolated peacekeeping observation posts — whether on a cold and windswept day in the Golan or on a barren strip of Mediterranean beach near the Israeli-Egyptian border — gives one a flavour of the monotonous but indispensable tasks performed by average soldiers in the field, especially in terms of confidence-building between parties. The dedication and professionalism of peacekeepers are starkly displayed in briefings conducted by officers at various headquarters. Finally, no textbook account of the vagaries of peacekeeping life can compare with actually bunking on a base in the Sinai Desert for a couple of days and witnessing the daily routine there.

I have often found it somewhat difficult to relate to the former and still-serving Canadian soldiers who act as guest speakers in my undergraduate course on peacekeeping. Perhaps I will understand their reminiscences and recollections better having walked a little in their shoes, and my students will no doubt be the beneficiaries in lectures and seminars whose content will hopefully now seem more "real" to them. One particular conclusion that I will be able to impart to them, having seen its manifestation first hand, is that some of the "cliches" associated with Canada's traditional role as peacekeeper that have developed over the years are not simply hoary generalizations, but actually ring true. Canadian peacekeepers are clearly well-liked and highly respected for their impartiality by local populations and governments, and much prized by force commanders because of their experience and expertise. I have often winced at repeated labelling of Canada as global "honest broker" and "helpful fixer", but this journey reminded me that every legend has its basis in fact.

Thus, the trip was immensely rewarding in terms of the insights into peacekeeping which I was able to glean and that can now be incorporated into my own research and teaching. However, it also showed me that historians have much to contribute themselves to such assignments. Historians were not specifically recruited to participate; the vast majority of our delegation were political scientists and strategic studies analysts. I learned much from them, especially about the utility of theoretical constructs in the study of conflict and conflict resolution, and found them to be well aware of the relevancy of historical interpretation in the analysis of contemporary events. Even so, the perspectives of the two disciplines are different, and this often revealed itself in the kinds of questions which were asked during round table discussion. The historian's interest in comparing past and present, and in using the former to shed light on the latter, can prove a useful complement to the international relations practitioner's focus on gauging the relationship between today's problems and tomorrow's solutions.

It seems to me that by virtue of their training historians bring two strengths in particular to government's and academe's perpetual search for ways to bridge the gap between policy and practice. Although not original ideas, they are often forgotten or downplayed. One is their emphasis on the lessons to be learned from the past. Surely we still study history in order to avoid making the same mistakes twice. Watching peacekeepers in the Middle East struggle with many of the same intractable problems which confronted them 30 years ago reinforced this truism for me. Peacekeeping missions face an ongoing challenge to retain an institutional memory, and historians obviously have a lot to offer in assisting this process.

The other area in which the historical profession can make a significant contribution to the making of public policy lies in its

core commitment to explaining why things are the way they are today. Why, for instance, do Canadian peacekeepers enjoy such a sterling reputation in the Middle East and why are they invariably assigned to positions of influence and responsibility? Much of the answer lies in their past performance and historians naturally have a special skill in identifying these kind of contextual factors. Such background information can be crucial to decision-makers charting future policy. I can think of at least one example related to my own area of study. Historical precedents abound to confirm the old adage that "peacekeeping is no job for a soldier, but a job only a soldier can do". Having a small taste of operational realities validated for me this maxim, which has become increasingly disputed in the post-Cold War rush to civilianize peace-keeping.

The importance of historians' taking on more public roles is great, therefore. Although history often appears to be under assault from some quarters, my trip provided ample evidence that it is neither dead nor irrelevant — unless we allow it to be. We need to educate ourselves more thoroughly about the kind of

public outreach programs which the federal government operates through the university community and how to access them. Moreover, historical groups (like the CHA) might lobby the government to make a conscious effort to include historians as a matter of course in activities associated with those programs. That way, the profession could play a more active part in informing Canadians on contemporary policy issues while widening its relevancy and increasing the demand for its services. Certainly it would be a means of adding credibility to classroom instruction, injecting greater depth into curricula, and bringing new dimensions to research projects. This is not to mention the pedagogical (and networking!) Benefits which would accrue from exposure to colleagues in other disciplines. Finally, and on a purely pragmatic note, today's constricted employment situation compels young historians in particular to pursue all options for selling their wares and thereby making themselves more marketable both within and without the halls of academe.

Dr. David A. Lenarcic, Wilfred Laurier University

IN MEMORIAM / DÉCÈS

Margaret Anchoretta Ormsby, president of the CHA (1965-66), died at her Okanagan home in Coldstream BC on 2 November 1996 at the age of 87. When she attended her first CHA meeting in the early 1940s, she and Hilda Neatby were the only women present.

After receiving a B.A. and M.A. from the University of British Columbia and a Ph.D. from Bryn Mawr, she taught at a private school in California and at McMaster. In 1943 she returned to UBC. From 1963 until retirement in 1974 she headed the rapidly expanding History department.

Her most important work, *British Columbia: A History* (1958, 1971) was a best seller in the province and is still an invaluable reference on the early political history of her native province.

She received many honours including most recently an honorary doctorate from the University of Northern British Columbia and membership in the Order of British Columbia and the Order of Canada.

Patricia Roy, University of Victoria

Révérend Père G.E. Giguère est décédé le 7 novembre 1996.

Michel Grenon, professeur de l'Université du Québec à Montréal, est décédé des suites d'une maladie foudroyante en décembre 1996. Jean-Paul Bernard rappelle les principaux éléments de sa carrière dans un texte publié dans le *Bulletin du département d'histoire de l'UQAM* (n° 22, hiver 1997, p. 16-18), dont nous reproduisons quelques extraits.

Michel Grenon est né à Montréal en 1936. Il a poursuivi ses études de baccalauréat à l'Université d'Ottawa (diplômé en 1957), de licence et de doctorat à l'Université de Montréal. Sa thèse a pour titre: «L'idée de progrès et le débat sur l'orientation de l'instruction publique pendant la Révolution française». Il est devenu professeur à l'Université de Montréal en 1961, mais, en 1970, il s'est joint à l'équipe professorale de l'Université du Québec à Montréal. Spécialiste de l'histoire de l'Europe moderne, «il était l'europaniste du Groupe de recherche sur les idéologies dans la société canadienne-française (GRISCAF)». Il s'est intéressé à l'avenir de la pratique historique comme en font foi les communications qu'il a données au Congrès des Sociétés savantes (Windsor 1988): «De l'avenir de l'histoire après les Annales»; et au colloque «Où s'en va l'histoire?» (Université Paris VII, 1989): «Vers une nouvelle alliance avec la littérature et la philosophie?». Jean-Paul Bernard souligne que «Michel Grenon était un historien heureux de son appartenance disciplinaire. Mais il s'intéressait aussi, activement, à la littérature, à l'histoire de l'art et à la philosophie. Il définissait l'universitaire comme quelqu'un à qui on a donné le loisir de réfléchir et qui a l'obligation de rendre compte de sa réflexion».